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Graphic Tales of Cancer

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"Cancer is not a single disease," said Robert A. Weinberg, a cancer biologist at the Whitehead Institute and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It's really dozens, arguably hundreds of diseases."²

Few people in North America are unaware of or unaffected by the popular and professional publicity related to the incidences of the various forms of cancer, the search for a "cure for cancer," the fund-raising runs and other similar campaigns in support of research into its causes and treatment, or the pink-looped ribbon that is immediately identifiable as the "logo" for breast cancer awareness. Study of the history of cancer through professional medical and surgical literature is an obvious and traditional portal to understanding the evolution of this affliction.³ Recently, however, historians of biomedicine and social history have deployed more imaginative ways to approach the study of cancer by interrogating its place within popular or "lay" culture in the United States and Canada. These studies have their own specific aims and arguments, but underlying many of them is the theme of mass fear and ignorance as an important part of the social construction or framing of cancer *qua* disease.⁴ As this recent historical scholarship has shown, beginning in the early decades of the 20th Century, the project to destigmatize and break the "silence" about cancer was begun; this disease may not have had the same emotive intensity or "baggage" associated with leprosy or mental illness but a diagnosis of cancer in the past -- and to be sure even today -- was greeted with great trepidation for it usually was perceived as a death sentence.⁵ Popular genres and media that have attracted the attention of historians to gauge and understand how cancer figured in the lay imagination, leisure, and routine daily life include popular literature, documentary and educational films, prime time television shows, and Hollywood movies. To this, we can add a significant body of cartoon art.

The comic strip began in the United States in the 1890s, and comic books in the 1930s. Fifty years later, a non-educational comic book about cancer was published. A decade later, the autobiographical and factual-themed comic book appeared. As the new millennium began, a flood of cancer narratives began and a score are currently available. It is now possible to speak of cancer in comic art as a literature, or movement,⁶ a point that was reached previously for prose, film, and television. However, since comic art is done directly by the cartoonist, it suffers from less mediation than a committee-type artform such as TV or film.⁷ These comics may be entertainment, but they also function as

catharsis, testimonies, and education.

Cartoons, Comics, Funnies, Comic Books

While names work against it, and demagogues have railed against it, comic art has not necessarily been for children.⁸ And cancer is not the only illness seen in comic art -- characters have died of AIDS in the "Doonesbury" comic strip and the *Incredible Hulk* comic book, and survived AIDS in Peeter's autobiographical *Blue Pills*; "Doonesbury"'s football-star-turned-coach B.D. suffered a traumatic amputation of his leg in Iraq; "Crankshaft" coped with Alzheimer's disease; Frenchman David B. cartooned a graphic novel on his brother's epilepsy; Haidee Merritt drew gag cartoons about her diabetes; "Ziggy"'s Tom Wilson wrote a prose book on his depression, and Keiko Tobe won awards for her 14-volume fictional manga about autism.⁹ Editorial cartoonists have long addressed the link between tobacco use and cancer,¹⁰ as did Garry Trudeau who has long opposed smoking as seen in his Mr. Butts cigarette character in "Doonesbury." He has let the American Cancer Society use the character in educational material. However, cancer narratives have drastically increased as a proportion of comic art's recent pathographies. Several confluent trends have contributed to this. First, cancer is no longer a stigmatized disease, but, in fact, may be a rallying point for identity. Second, comic books have expanded into longer format "graphic novels"; a strong trend to autobiographical stories grew out of the 1960s "underground comix." And finally, certain aspects of cancer fundraising have become commercialized (see *Dykes* #514). For those who may doubt what they see in a lesbian-oriented comic strip, the *New York Times* recently noted [recurring cancer sufferer] "Ms. Kutt...chafes at the way breast cancer is presented -- the pink ribbons, the celebration of survivors, the emphasis on early detection, as though that will insure you will never get an incurable cancer" (Kolata, 2009). Both society and technology have contributed to the use of comic art in cancer narratives. In the 1960s, with the "war" on cancer, personal discussions of the disease began to become acceptable and far more common as the 20th Century drew to a close.¹¹ At the same time, in comics, the rise of autobiographical "underground comix" and the growing ability to self-publish let cartoonists entertain more personal themes without as many restrictions imposed by mass media companies. These two trends intersected in the 1990s. While cancer has become a more visible disease, "...the death rate for cancer, adjusted for the size and age of the population, dropped only 5 percent from 1950 to 2005. In contrast, the death rate for heart disease dropped 64 percent in that time, and for flu and pneumonia, it fell 58 percent." (Kolata, 2009) As a result, the general public sees more people suffering from, and dying of, cancer than ever before in history. Of course, the same view holds true for the cartoonist

or illustrator who ends up doing a story about cancer, although the personal question “Why me?” is usually included.

Many of the autobiographical comics explain the author’s confusion with the medical complex, and also their efforts to understand what cancer is and how it is attacking their body. Several of the texts are explicitly instructional in how to deal with the situation or doctors. Often they start as shorter works and expand as the authors realized they have more to say about their experiences. There are many ways one could consider these narratives -- from fictional to fictionalized through to non-fiction; long-form graphic novel vs. short form comic strip; a continuum from self-help through biographical slice of life; cancer-surviving cartoonist vs. bereft survivor; women’s breast cancer vs. every other type...for our purposes, a chronological view lends itself to an initial introductory survey. In this study, we have specifically exempted soap-opera type comic strips, which trade in emotional tales, yet rarely have any underlying deeper meaning to them. The reader should keep in mind that like any other work, these accounts are subjective and may or may not reflect “reality.”¹²



Fig.1. *The Long Road Home*. Garry Trudeau.

Before Jim Starlin’s *The Death of Captain Marvel* graphic novel, published by Marvel Comics in 1982, cancer was rarely mentioned in comic art. If it was, the purpose was usually didactic, and the art was made with the assumption that educational information could reach a broader or different audience through cartoons. Comic books ran “great men” biographies of physicians and researchers, some of whom dealt with cancer.¹³ Traditionally, a typical comic book about cancer was meant to be educational. *Smoking and Cancer*, a 1963 work for Canada’s Department of National Health and Welfare, contains almost no sequential art, and the artwork it does have is stiff and uninteresting. While it presents basic facts, one imagines that very few recipients paid a great deal of attention to it.

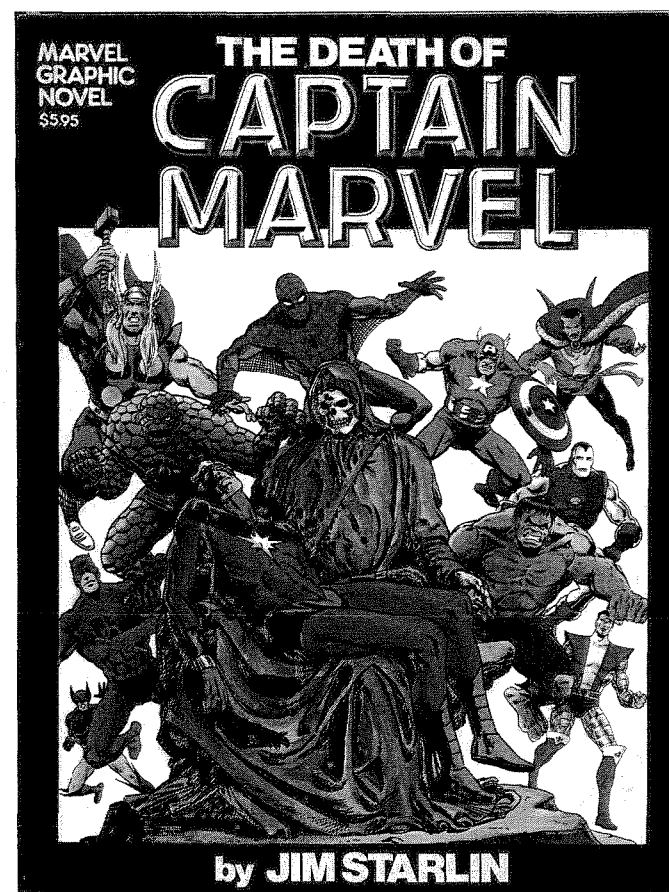


Fig. 2. *The Death of Captain Marvel* cover. Jim Starlin.

In Starlin’s graphic novel, a superhero, Captain Marvel, was exposed to chemicals which eventually led to his developing cancer, apparently of the

lung from inhaling a poison gas. All of Marvel Comics super-scientists and magicians were mobilized to attempt to cure Marvel's cancer, but to no avail, and he died hallucinating of a final battle with his oldest enemy. Starlin's work was filtered through his father's death from cancer.¹⁴ He had been commissioned to kill the character to make way for a new one of the same name, and Marvel's editors did not specify how the character should die (Cooke, 1998:64). In a 1983 interview, Starlin noted the difference in this comic book death -- "It was about a fellow who wasn't going out with an explosion or being riddled by rays or whatever. He was a super man dying of human causes." Starlin said, "My father had cancer and we thought he was going to get better at the time. So I started kicking around the idea of Captain Marvel having cancer. As it worked out, I got halfway through the pencils and my father finally died of cancer. And so for me doing the story and finishing it off was sort of a catharsis -- it was purging myself of a lot of sorrow, I guess you'd call it, that I had inside. I was able to work it out much better than, say, my brother -- who let it build up inside him and took months to work it out" (Kraft: 1983:7-9). The emotional page of Marvel's reunion with his teenage sidekick Rick Jones perhaps was directly influenced by Starlin's experience. However, the book received few reviews and apparently none outside the comics press.¹⁵

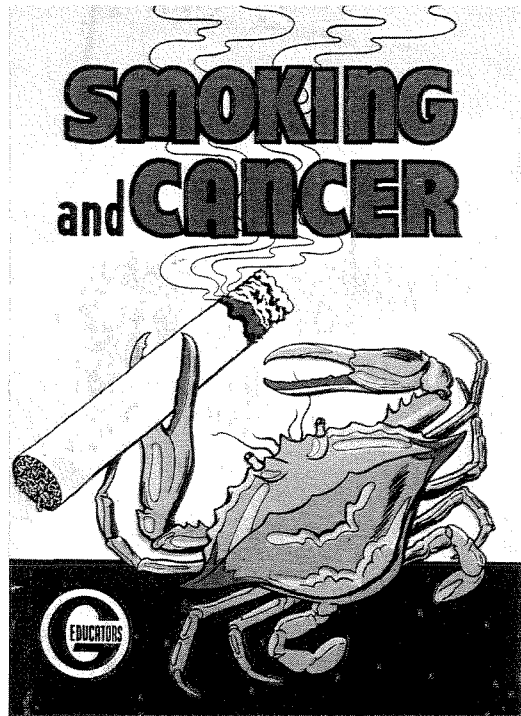


Fig. 3. *Smoking and Cancer* comic. 1963.



Fig. 4. *The Death of Captain Marvel*. Jim Starlin.

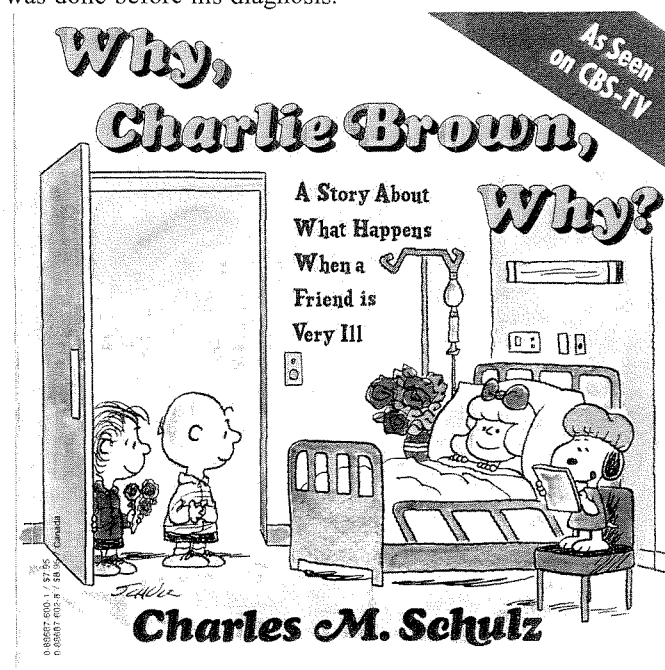
Other superhero comics have used cancer as a narrative hook -- Marvel Comics' Deadpool character was suffering from cancer, but was saved by Wolverine's "mutant healing factor" blood. DC Comics supernatural comic book *Hellblazer's* character John Constantine developed lung cancer from smoking. Using the unorthodox therapy of making a deal with, and then cheating, the devil, Constantine was cured. In the movie adaptation of *Watchmen*, Dr. Manhattan accidentally gives people around him cancer, but this is not in the comic book.¹⁶



Fig. 5. Hellblazer deal.

A more relevant fictional account was 1990s "Peanuts" story, *Why, Charlie Brown, Why? A Story About What Happens When a Friend Is Very Ill* by Charles Schulz. Based on an animated television special, Linus' new friend Janice bruises easily, and when she goes to the nurse's office at school, she does not return. When the boys hear she is in the hospital, they go visit her.

The text suddenly becomes denser, filling an entire facing page opposite the artwork, rather than consisting of two sentences as it had previously. The text is needed to address Janice's leukemia. Charlie Brown, standing in for an average child, even asks, "You're not going to die, are you?" Janice explains, "Now they have me hooked up to this intravenous. It's a way of giving me chemotherapy. This medicine will probably help me, but they tell me it could also make my hair fall out. Please don't worry." The text ebbs and flows -- getting long when Linus explains to Lucy that cancer is not contagious, or when he tells a school bully why Janice is bald. The whole story is oddly inconsistent as didactic sections are interleaved with typical "Peanuts" storylines like Snoopy sneaking onto the school bus or decorating his dog house with Christmas lights. Schulz eventually died from cancer, but this story was done before his diagnosis.

Fig. 6. *Why, Charlie Brown, Why?...* Charles Schulz.

Our Cancer Year in 1994 is the breakthrough work. Longtime autobiographical comic writer Harvey Pekar told the story of his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma cancer, in cooperation with his wife Joyce Brabner and artist Frank Stack. In an interview, he noted,

In a way, I'm writing one big autobiography and these individual issues are just installments of it. So I wrote about having cancer in *Our Cancer Year*. I would have written about anything that happened to me in 1990-

91. So I wrote about what happened to me. My wife added a very valuable section about what it was like to deal with people who have it. As with my other work, I try to make it as realistic as possible. I don't try to idealize myself. I was really scared when I had cancer and I wasn't heroic about it at all. I think that's the way a lot of people react to having it. It's a novel-size book, about 226 pages, illustrated by Frank Stack. It's a nice book (Greenlee, 1996:57).

Pekar's story reached a wider audience through the 2003 film "American Splendor." In contrast to other narratives, this is a joint work of the patient, Pekar, and his caretaker wife, Joyce Brabner, and in interviews one can see the tension over the question of whose story this actually is.¹⁷

In September 1998, Greg Evans gave Hodgkin's lymphoma to Delta, one of the teenage characters in his comic strip "Luann." The difficulties of chemotherapy were glossed over except for Delta's loss of her hair. By the following January, she was in remission, musing, "You know what the hardest part of having cancer is? Making other people feel comfortable with it." ("Luann" 1/5/1999) The strip then left the topic, and returned to its usual focus on teen angst and romance.

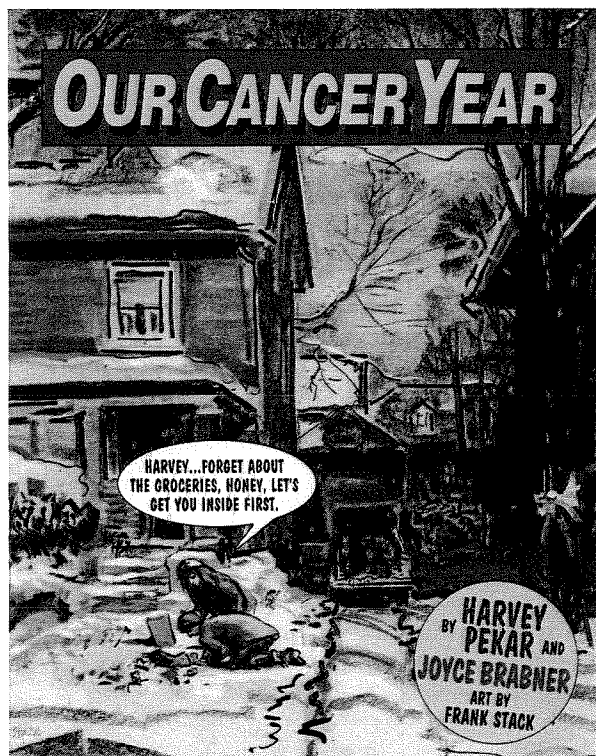


Fig. 7. *Our Cancer Year*. Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner, Frank Stack.



Fig. 8. *Our Cancer Year*. Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner, Frank Stack.

Tom Batiuk's *Lisa's Story: The Other Shoe* collects comic strips in which cancer strikes in "Funky Winkerbean"'s fictional world. The story of Lisa Moore's breast cancer initially began in 1999 (17 years after Batiuk started the strip as a gag-a-day format) and ended with Lisa apparently cured and deciding to undergo breast reconstruction surgery. The cartoonist had his strips reviewed, presumably before submitting them to his syndicate for publication, by several breast cancer organizations for accuracy. Money from the collected *Lisa's Story* was donated for breast cancer research. Batiuk returned to Lisa seven years later when he had her cancer recur. In the intervening years,

Batiuk himself suffered from prostate cancer which “was a real kick in the stomach. It brought to fore a whole bunch of emotions for me I hadn’t dealt with before.... I realized more than anything, I had another story to tell. I realized there were things I hadn’t even scratched the surface of before with ‘Lisa’s Story’” (McBain). In a later interview, he said, “I realized there is a huge gulf between empathy and personal experience.... It showed me that I had only skimmed over the surface of the subject” (Kropko, 2007). Batiuk’s second version of Lisa’s breast cancer was far more clinical, probably due to his own experiences, and, this time, he killed his character. Her death led to many comments in newspapers, and a surprising amount of them were negative since the comics were not “funny.” Batiuk did not intend it to be of course. “It’s kind of what all art does, the best of art. We share our common humanity and situations as we go through life. I think if someone can read the story and say, ‘Oh, I’m not the only one going through something like this,’ that’s useful. I think good art does that -- it puts us in touch with each other” (McBain). His storyline held up, surprisingly well over a long time period, far better than one would expect a daily comic strip to do and in this collection, it reads as a graphic novel. In March 2009, Batiuk did a standalone strip in which his titular character Funky was notified that his PSA levels were elevated, thus, perhaps eventually leading Funky down the same path his creator had taken.

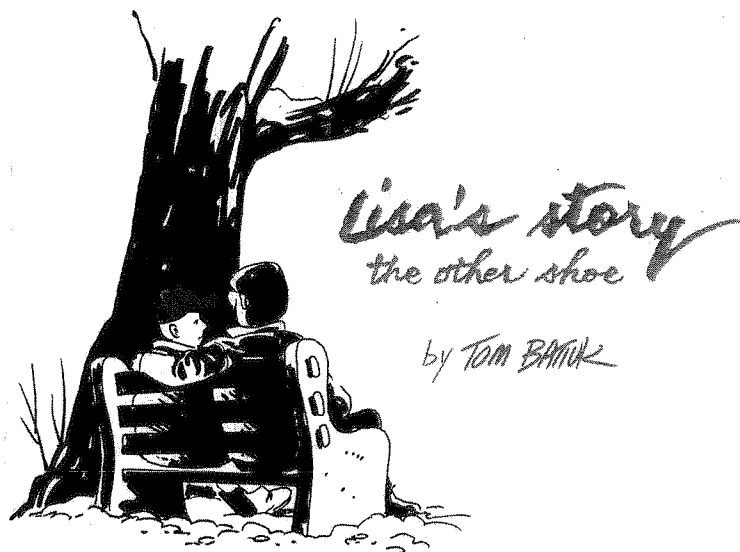


Fig. 9. Cover, *Lisa's Story: The Other Shoe*. Tom Batiuk.

In 2003, Alison Bechdel gave breast cancer to Sydney, a somewhat peripheral character in her lesbian-focused comic strip “Dykes to Watch Out For.”¹⁸ Bechdel herself has not had breast cancer, but a friend died of it. In a

2001 interview, while talking about anchoring a comic strip in reality, Bechdel jokingly said, “I’m determined to have someone get cancer in my strip before [Lynn Johnston] does it [in “For Better or For Worse”], though.”¹⁹ Sydney is a materialistic college professor, more intent on getting tenure than watching her health. Her cancer remained a secondary or tertiary storyline, although as an alternative syndicated strip, Bechdel could give Sydney’s partner lines like, “Your first mammo! Don’t worry, it’s no big deal. They just clamp your tits in a vise for a couple of seconds” (“Dykes” 402; 11/6/02). Reflecting the comic’s larger geo-political concerns, Sydney’s doctor, in a strip titled ‘Metaphor as Illness,’ tells her, “...you need to make a decision soon. We don’t want those little terrorists amassing any more recruits before we go in there to wipe them out” (“Dykes” 412; 3/26/03).

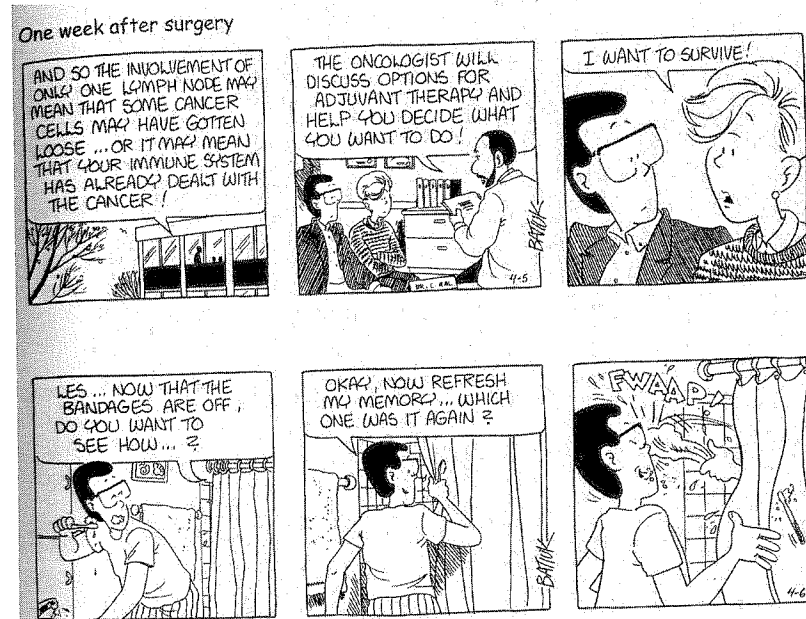


Fig. 10. *Lisa's Story: The Other Shoe*. Tom Batiuk.

Stan Mack’s 2004 *Janet & Me: An Illustrated Story of Love and Loss* did not get the attention it deserved. After the death of his partner because of lung cancer, Mack returned to his journalistic roots, writing, “I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to write about us and what we lived through.” Mack’s book is a combination of text and comic art. Like several others, he talks about the difficulties patients have in dealing with medical institutions, but more than most other books, he focused on his partner’s mortality, and fear of death. Paul Miller’s 2005 *A Cartoonist’s Guide to Prostate Cancer* is the most explicitly instructional of all the works, essentially functioning as a step-by-

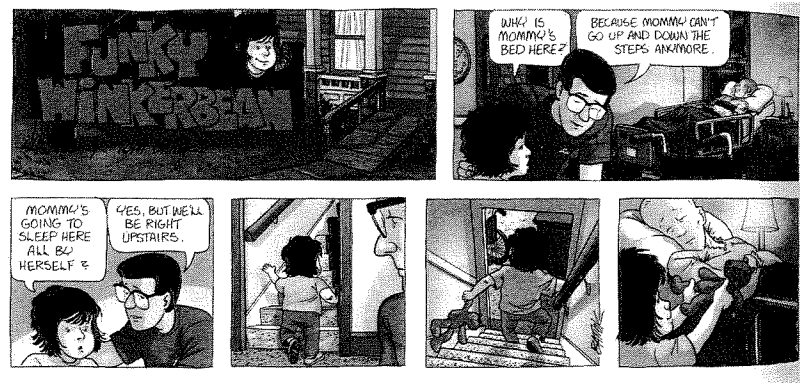


Fig. 11. Lisa's Story: The Other Shoe. Tom Batiuk.

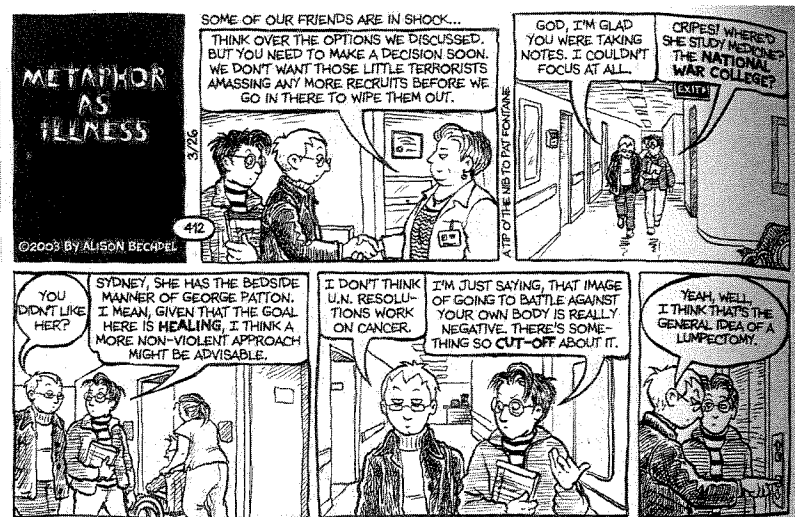
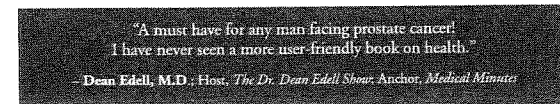


Fig. 12. Metaphor as Illness. Alison Bechtel.

step manual on basic information.

Four biographical stories on cancer came out in 2006, and two of these began as webcomics, or comic strips published on the Internet. Miriam Engelberg's 2006 autobiography *Cancer Made Me A Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* told her story through individual comic strips which added up to a longer narrative. Engelberg began her book with a four-panel strip about being a breast cancer survivor. She began her story of breast cancer with a telephone call about the necessity for her to schedule biopsies on the next page. Engelberg's strips touched on different aspects of her experience, including fear, guilt, hope, medical treatment, indignities; she said that the only thing she did not include was her nine-year old son. Unfortunately, her



A CARTOONIST'S GUIDE TO PROSTATE CANCER

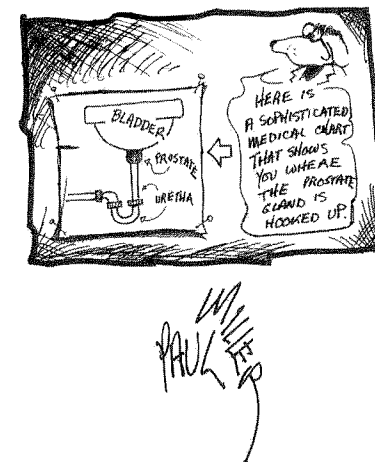


Fig. 13. A Cartoonist's Guide to Prostate Cancer. Paul Miller.

cancer spread to her brain and she died a few months after her book was published.

Anders Nilsen's 2006 *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* recounts the story of his fiancée Cheryl Weaver, and her eventual death from Hodgkin's lymphoma. Nilsen explicitly writes, "the book is dedicated to Cheryl, it's a memorial to her, and to honor both her and our life together." The book is rather a multimedia collage rather than straight comic art, and Nilsen pasted in letters and photographs around his comics.

New Yorker cartoonist Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* was originally presented as a six-page story about her breast cancer in *Glamour* magazine in May 2005; in 2006 she published it as a 212-page graphic story. The basic story did not change, of course, and most of the artwork was retained, but the dialogue was changed. Her story covers her diagnosis and treatment, and she especially shows her hopes and fears about her upcoming marriage and her continuing ability to work as a cartoonist. Soon after her book came

out, Acocella Marchetto ran a one-page editorial strip in the *New York Times* questioning the rate of cancer research and a two-page interview strip in *Publisher's Weekly* about her rationale for the book. *The Lancet's* reviewer noted a salient point -- "...when it comes to serious illness, money matters. When Acocella Marchetto is diagnosed with cancer, she realises she has forgotten to renew her health insurance. Luckily her wealthy fiancé offers to foot the \$200,000 bill for treatment, saving her from the fate of the many other patients in the USA without health insurance who have a 49% greater risk of dying from breast cancer than those who are covered" (Shetty, 2007:1684). In October 2009, Acocella Marchetto continued a licensing campaign for *Cancer Vixen* in cooperation with C.O. Bigelow for a Limited Edition Cancer Vixen Kit of personal grooming products, apparently because, "C.O. Bigelow will help give cancer the boot with a \$250,000 donation to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation."²⁰

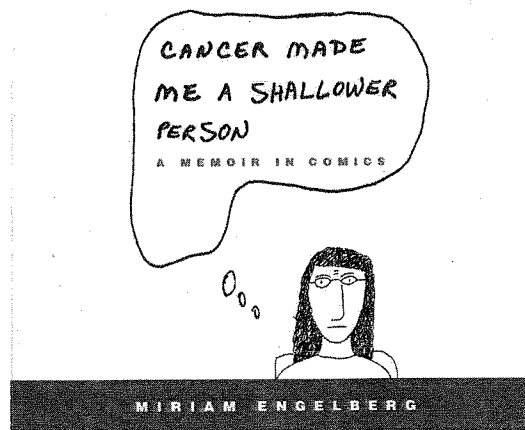


Fig. 14. *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics*. Miriam Engelberg.

Brian Fies webcomic *Mom's Cancer* won a 2005 comics industry Eisner Award, and was collected the following year. Fies' story, like Engleberg's, is non-fiction and is told through smaller comic strips adding up to a larger whole. Fies' mother suffered from lung cancer, and Fies "created *Mom's Cancer* because I wish someone had created it for me. I began serializing [it] on the Internet in early 2004 as a kind of underground journalism: dispatches from the front lines of a battle into which my family stumbled unprepared." In his introduction, Fies noted another interesting point about these narratives: "...

DON'T GO WHERE I CAN'T FOLLOW
BY ANDERS NILSEN
(WITH CHERYL WENDE)



DRAWN 3 QUARTERS

Fig. 15. *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*. Anders Nilsen.

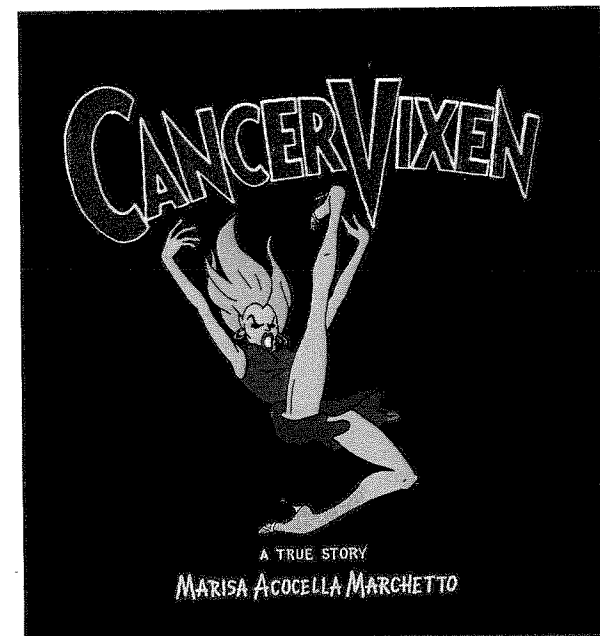
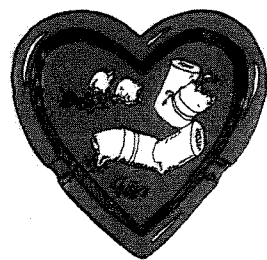


Fig. 16. *Cancer Vixen* cover. Marisa Acocella Marchetto.



Fig. 17. *Cancer Vixen*. Marisa Acocella Marchetto.

THESE THINGS AIN'T
GONNA SMOKE THEMSELVES



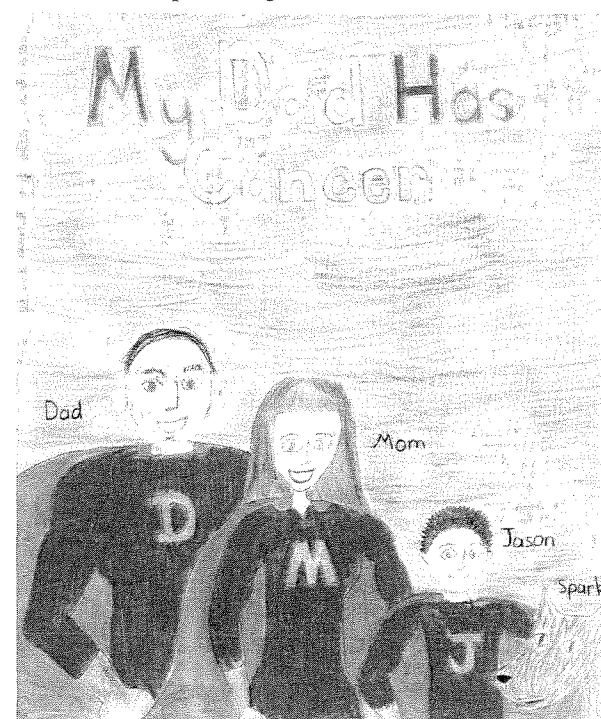
A LOVE HATE LOVE HATE
LOVE LETTER TO A VERY BAD HABIT

EMILY FLAKE

Fig. 18. *These Things Ain't Gonna Smoke Themselves*. Emily Flake.

I was astonished by how many readers saw their own stories in ours. I was also gratified to get letters from medical professionals and educators saying that [it] helped them understand their patients' perspectives and asking permission to use it in their curricula."

An opposing viewpoint is presented by Emily Flake in her 2007 book *These Things Ain't Gonna Smoke Themselves* (which originally appeared in 2006 in the *Baltimore City Paper*) in which she argues that the pleasure of smoking currently outweighs future fears of cancer. The peculiarity of "seeing is believing" where Flake shows her lifestyle in pictures leads towards a reader's sympathy for her iconoclastic approach, but that can quickly be alleviated by picking up another work from around the same time period. In June 2007, two children, Emily Marie Boggs and Meredith Davis, created a minicomic²¹ *My Dad Has Cancer* about a father who appears to be a superhero and beats colon cancer; the book is dedicated to Boggs' father who died at age fifty. It is notable how few of these narratives are concerned with lung cancer -- the cancer most tied to individual responsibility and the focus of most of the didactic comic art works preceding this current narrative movement.



Written by Emily Marie Boggs

Illustrated by Meredith Davis

Fig. 19. *My Dad Has Cancer*. Emily Marie Boggs and Meredith Davis.

Chris Ayers eschewed the graphic novel approach in his 2008 book *The Daily Zoo Vol. 1: Keeping the Doctor at Bay with a Drawing a Day*. As with other cartoonists, his book is a form of therapy, but instead of telling a story, he drew a caricature animal every day of the year after his treatment ended. Interspersed with the cartoons are text passages about his treatment. He followed this with a second book in 2009.

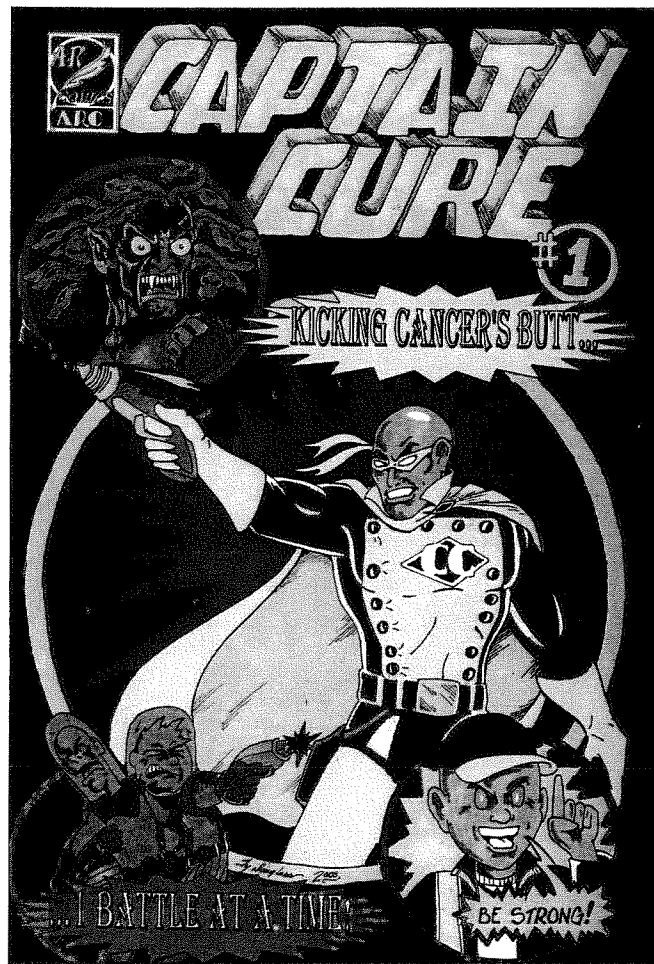


Fig. 20. *Captain Cure*. Ty Wakefield.

Ty Wakefield's traditional 2008 comic book *Captain Cure #1* hearkens back to Captain Marvel's struggle, although as a self-published comic, it is much less polished. Wakefield was diagnosed with osteo-sarcoma, and wrote, "I found that a majority of those afflicted with my type of cancer were children.... I had [...] just 2 months before being diagnosed, started my own

comic book with my brother, and thought how can I use this talent? Then almost like the bat flying in the window, it came to me.... CAPTAIN CURE!" *Captain Cure* is actually a child with cancer, who in great comic book tradition, becomes a superhero and through positive thinking and fighting back, defeats his cancer (which was drawn as green aliens).

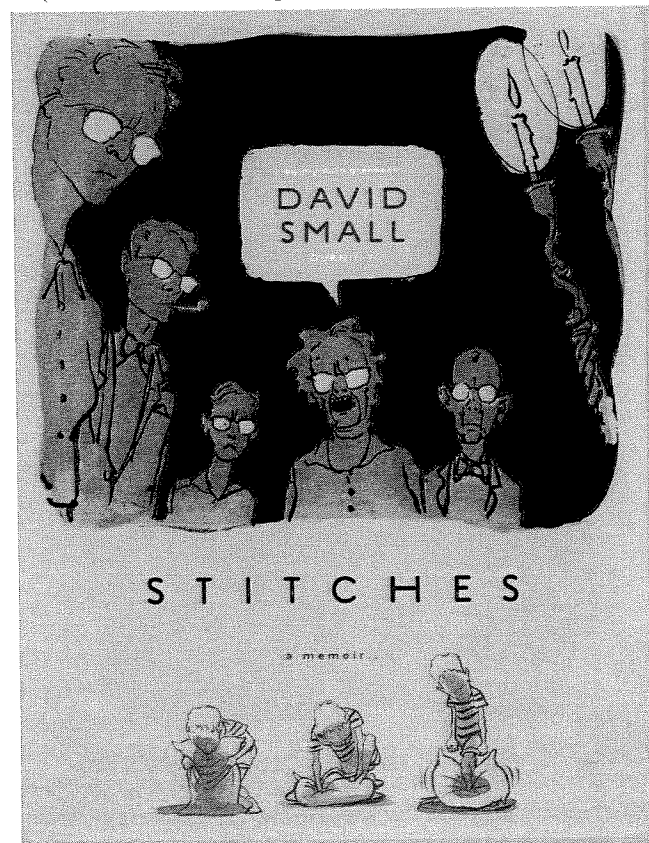


Fig. 21. *Stitches: A Memoir*. David Small.

Several cartoonists have tried to address cancer treatment more directly. Dan Reynolds undertook a fundraising campaign, "Using Humor to Fight My Tumor," after his treatment, for testicular cancer. He is a gag cartoonist, and drew cartoons during his treatment which included chemotherapy for metastasis into his abdomen. He sent these cartoons and an account of his cancer to a syndicate blog and noted he would donate any subscription money to the American Cancer Society (Cagle, 2009). British cartoonist Roy "MITCH" Mitchell pursued a similar path, selling copies of his religiously-themed cartoon "God Is..." as a book and postcards to fundraise for a hospital (Carr, 2009). Sandra Bell-Lundy permitted the Canadian Cancer Society to use her *Between*

Friends characters and wrote three comic strips that then were animated. Jack Guinan produced greeting cards to raise funds for CureSearch for Children's Cancer in 2010 (Maranjian, 2010). Christine Mignola, wife of cartoonist Mike Mignola, gathered 12 comic book artists to draw movie monsters to be auctioned to raise money for a child's chemotherapy (Ching, 2011). Sadly, comic book colorist Moose Baumann is raising money for himself to pay for his wife's breast cancer treatment by selling prints of superheroes (Pantozzi, 2011).

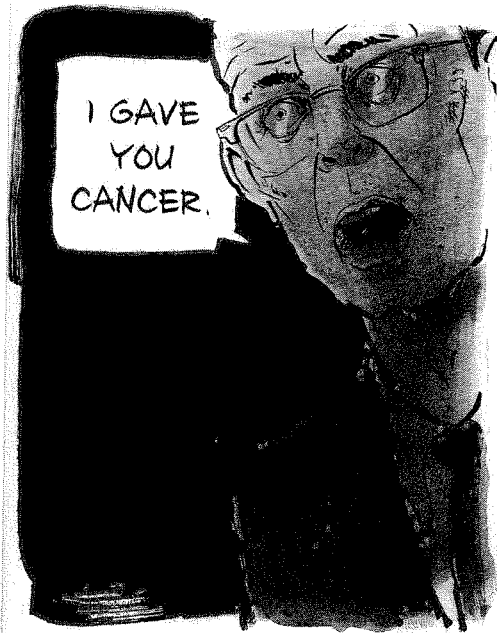


Fig. 22. *Stitches*. "I Gave You Cancer." David Small.

David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir* deals more with his unhappy childhood, but that unhappiness is partially a result of medical issues. A sickly child, he noted, "And it was dad the radiologist who gave me the many x-rays that were supposed to cure my sinus problems" (Small, 2009:21). At age 14, he was operated on for what he was told was a sebaceous cyst, but was actually found to be cancer during the operation. A second operation removed his thyroid and one of his vocal cords, but he only found out he had cancer through reading a letter on his mother's desk. At age 15, his father took him out for dinner and told him, "In those days we gave any kid born with breathing difficulty x-rays. Two -- to -- four -- hundred rads.... I gave you cancer" (Small, 2009:265-287). In October 2009, *Stitches* was a finalist for the National Book Award in the Young People's Literature category, the second time a graphic novel had been nominated (Griep, 2009).



Fig. 23. *Marvel Divas* 1.

The growth in comics cancer literature continues.²² In the recent miniseries *Marvel Divas*, the story of four second-string superheroines who hang around together, Firestar discovered that her powers have given her breast cancer. After a flirtation with realistic treatment, she's "healed" by the Son of Satan, but then he reverses his deal -- the usual problem of dealing with the devil. Marvel Comics' *One Month to Live* 5-issue miniseries is also about a superhero with cancer, and "the quartet [of writers] found that each person involved had had somebody in their lives who had either survived or succumbed to cancer" (Truitt, 2010). Comic book writer Jake Black said of his experience with cancer, "Back in March [2009], I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma -- a form of cancer that attacks the lymphatic system. Since then, I've been undergoing chemotherapy. The treatments have been pretty harsh on my body, but they are doing the job." He noted that he learned to appreciate every day, and, "I guess a more direct effect, though, has been on an issue of *Tales of the TMNT* [Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles] I wrote recently, which will be out in March, I think, where the Ninja Turtles fight an alien cancer. It's a pretty fun issue, and I wrote it a little tongue in cheek about the cancer

experience.” Andrew Rostan’s 2011 graphic novel *An Elegy for Amelia Johnson* examines a woman’s attempt to organize her life as she dies of cancer. *Tumor* by Joshua Hale Fialkov is the story of a private investigator doing the same, even when he can no longer trust his senses due to his brain tumor. Tyler Dorchester had a central character’s father die of cancer in his gay-themed comic strip “The Brotherhood” in 2011, based on his own real-life experiences, as we saw previously with Jim Starlin. Ross Mackintosh did the same with his father’s experience in *Seeds*. Shortly before his death in December 2011, Ronald Searle permitted his 1969 drawings done to cheer his wife after breast cancer treatments to be collected as *Les Très Riches Heures de Mrs Mole*.²³ Billy Tucci turned to religion, noting, “My beautiful wife Deborah’s had a terrible year and a half in her battle against breast cancer -- a battle. Thank God, she’s won. But though hard, a lot of good also came out of it and that taught me to put my priorities into perspective; to see what really matters in life and to follow what’s important to you and your family.” He produced the graphic novel *A Child Is Born* based on the birth of Jesus as a result (Unknown, *Scoop* 2011). Comic book writer Jake Black is writing about his disease in a prose non-fiction anthology that he is compiling, instead of using cartoons to tell his story (McKenna, 2012). Sharon Lintz’s *Pornhounds* #2, a comic that Lintz writes and hires artists for, originally focused on her work behind the scenes in the pornography industry, but this issue shifts to Lintz’s double mastectomy and breast reconstruction. Jennifer Hayden’s *The Story Of My Tits* will depict her struggle with breast cancer when it appears.²⁴

Archie Comics, surprisingly emerging as one of the more socially relevant publishers of the 21st Century, has had two storylines in their alternative future *Life With Archie* magazine. In 2011, beloved teacher Ms. Grundy died of breast cancer, while 2012 will see Cheryl Blossom, one-time rival to Betty and Veronica for Archie’s affections, suffering through chemotherapy treatments for the same disease. In 2010, King Features Syndicate sponsored “Comics Go Pink,” in which over 50 comic strips used the color to raise funds for breast cancer charities (Gardner, 2010). Marvel Comics has been active in charitable acts as well. In 2011, they produced a *Super Shot* comic book based on a script of a child with cancer; licensed St. Baldrick’s Foundation to produce a fund-raising t-shirt in 2012, and, along with DC Comics, let a breast cancer education campaign in Mozambique use images of its superheroines. Also in 2011, Rob Bass, along with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, produced *Electron Boy* for another child with cancer (Long, 2010; Pelt, 2011; Pope, 2011). Educational comics have not disappeared either -- a dermatologist has produced three issues of *Captain Cutaneum*, explaining three different types of cancer through a superhero lens.

Given the range of subject matter and artistic styles that are embraced under the genre of the graphic novel and comics relating to health, disease, and medicine -- especially those dealing with cancer -- how may we best

understand this phenomenon? How ought we to “read” these works? What multiple uses do they serve? We would like to suggest a few preliminary answers to such fundamental questions. People suffering from cancer, and in the grasp of the modern medical complex, are writing and drawing about what was important to them. Often what was important was bearing witness to a life (and death), or providing a version of their stories to help others. Raising money for cancer research is another important rationale. The fact that many of these comics are primary sources is an important reason for historians to concern themselves with these comics.



Fig. 24. Wonder Woman.

To expand on some of these thoughts, at a very basic level, the growth in numbers of these works can be seen as reflection of broader scholarly, societal, and media trends about cancer. Medical history scholarship of cancer has increased. During the later 20th Century, cancer imagery in North American society visibly and publically increased due to “branding” with pink ribbons and emblems worn on clothing and displayed on cars, fund-raising runs and walks, and celebrity and corporate “endorsements.” Public awareness was also raised by movies (e.g. “An Act of Murder,” 1948; “Love Story,” 1970; “The Doctor,” 1991; “Wit,” 2001; “My Life Without Me,” 2003). Yet, it is likely that the genre of popular culture most recently prolific in featuring cancer among other diseases is the comic book, along with its more reflective and complex relation, the graphic novel. Although initially understood as “alternative” or “underground” reading material and simultaneously dismissed as “kid’s stuff” and juvenile, from the 1960s on this genre has attracted serious attention by scholars in ever-widening fields, owing to the themes addressed

and the manner in which they are dealt.

As the genre of comic books and graphic novels traditionally dealt with issues of victimization, empowerment, justice, injustice, and retribution, it has become a recognized medium through which to deal with "tough" social and moral issues of continuing concern. That issues of life, death, loss, and suffering vis-à-vis cancer are tackled through this medium and done so in ways that are multi- and cross-generational, therefore, should not surprise us. To engage in formal literary criticism of, or reader response analysis to, these works is beyond the scope of this paper. But, groundwork for any such further study by others can be laid by considering the material cited here as a subgenre of what have been called "pathographies" or invalidism/sickness/illness narratives. Typically, studied examples of such works are textual, not visual or graphic, and have therefore been analyzed with respect to their narrative structure, social criticisms, along with their often instructive (self-help) "take home" messages.²⁵ But graphic novels and comic books, especially those with medical content, can just as fruitfully be critically analyzed from literary, as well as artistic, perspectives as has been done recently by Hilary Chute and Susan Squier.²⁶

In this regard, a particularly helpful framework is Arthur Frank's essay on the "orphan genre" of first-person narratives of illness.²⁷ Although not all works we note in this discussion are autobiographical, many are, thus as, "first-person narratives," they fall within Frank's categorization; moreover, as many more were written by close family members (e.g. parent, sibling), or a life partner, these authors were intimately connected to the illness narrative subject. Also helpful here is that many of the graphic novels or comics books dealing with cancer were subtitled explicitly or implicitly understood as "true stories" -- a descriptor that further validates our application of Frank's framework.

For Frank, three distinct narrative "voices" exist (and occasionally they can overlap): the *restitution* story, the *chaos* story, and the *quest* story. The first is routinely familiar as the facile plotline for most television advertisements for evanescent ailments: sufferer (e.g. of headache, colds, arthritis, constipation, etc) is relieved by an identified commercial pharmaceutical product provided by a helpful and concerned person (e.g. wife, mother, co-worker, etc) that restores health and/or work productivity -- all is well again in the short term. The second is more complicated in structure because it deals with silences, or lost time or sentience during an illness, thus "chaos narratives teaches readers to hear, in what is not said, what cannot be said" (Frank, 1994:7). Finally, there is the quest narrative, the one most likely to be encountered. Here disease is both real, but also described as a metaphoric journey that can be life-altering, regardless whether the endpoint is survival or death. This journey is marked by trials and tribulations (diagnoses, treatments, degeneration, improvements/remissions) with many helpers and/or hinderers along the way -- medical and healthcare personnel, family members,

unexpected friends, and so on. In the end, the sufferer (or questor, or "hero/heroine") may gain "enlightenment," or a greater appreciation of life, love, and what happiness means, along with health regained (but not necessarily always this last point).

Applying particularly the chaotic and quest voices to graphic novels is instructive, as, in so doing, readers can mine and appreciate them further. First, such a classificatory scheme can allow comparisons to be made between works that on the surface may appear to be quite different owing to their artistic styles or disease subject matter; hence, at the structural level of such works, narrative similarities may be more easily discerned. Second, while it may be difficult to present the chaotic voice requiring readers to hear what is not said in a traditional text format, it can be readily achieved in the graphic novel. For example, in *Epileptic* by David B., the lost time and space during Jean-Christophe's seizures are depicted in panels heavy with black ink along with a mythical monster curling around him; for another author/sufferer, lost time and space could also have been just as effectively represented through blank panels or entire "empty" pages.

Finally, consider how invoking the quest story can perhaps render *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto more than an "irritating...sweet, appealing, and not overly accomplished...candy-coated narrative" (Chute, 2007:416-417). Yes, the "Sex and the City" style and sensibilities may be off-putting to some because of their apparent superficiality, but read more critically, it is a quest story *par excellence*. Marchetto's journey begins by a reversal of her good fortune and happy life because of her diagnosis of breast cancer, and becomes more complicated as she navigates the perils of the complex cultures of clinical medicine and hospitals (suffering even more as the bills for treatment pile up and she then realizes that her health insurance has lapsed), discovers who her friends really are (which included her "s'mother"), and who they are not. She then undergoes periods of deep religious and personal introspection, before she finally drives off happily into the future with her husband-to-be, who had been constantly working in the background as a helper. "So," Marchetto asks, "what does 29 needles+18 pounds+15 radiation technicians+11 medical assistants+9 nurses+8 doctors+\$192,720.04+2 rabbis+1 priest =?" Her answer: "It adds up to an experience that has changed me forever..." (Acocello Marchetto, 2006:208-09). Trite? Maybe. Triumphant? Yes. Quest narrative? Definitely.

Comic art pertaining to medical matters can also play a beneficial didactic role in the classroom, thereby expanding the instructional/inspirational roles we have already identified. Two cohorts (n=130) of pre-clerkship (first-year) medical students at Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada were required to read *Cancer Vixen*, discuss it in class as a group, and then submit an individual formal written assignment for evaluation.²⁸ While students were free to reflect on and express any opinion of *Cancer Vixen*, it was mandated

that they also analyze the physician-patient interactions and encounters depicted within the CanMEDS roles as established by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada: communicator, manager, health advocate, professional, scholar, and collaborator. A formal essay assignment for these first-year medical students asked them to analyze *Cancer Vixen* as a patient narrative and to relate this first-person pathographical account to those physician roles identified by the CanMEDS project.²⁹



Fig. 25. *Cancer Vixen* mammogram. Marisa Acocella Marchetto.

Although most students could see the importance of a well-rounded physician to facilitate a patient's transition from cancer victim to cancer vixen, an overwhelming majority believed that this process was greatly aided when physicians concentrated on being a *communicator*. This important lesson for these physicians-to-be to learn was greatly aided by the textual/visual format of the book in which the author-patient expressed her frustrations during various clinical encounters in a literally graphic way. In essays, students

identified specific panels or scenarios in which physicians involved exhibited problematic behaviors. For example, one physician turns his back on his patient (Acocello Marchetto, 2006:4), and another physician appears to be dismissive of his patient's concern over her need to know "why" she developed breast cancer (32). The students were also quick to pick up on more subjective aspects of physician-patient communication. As Acocella Marchetto is a self-confessed "shoe-crazy, lipstick-obsessed...fashion fanatic," it perhaps is not surprising that her decision to choose a particular oncologist was based in part on this doctor's "fab slingbacks" (Acocello Marchetto, 2006:132). While this appears to be extremely shallow grounds on which to base such an important decision, none the less, these students sensed the patient's need to be comfortable with and to be able to relate at some human level to her physician, as both were going to embark on a long and emotional clinical journey. This was another valuable didactic lesson in communication.

We maintain that the actual physical format of this graphic novel also has relevance in the training of medical students -- at an abstract level as it can help acquaint them with the often chaotic existence of clinical practice. As a patient narrative, the story does have a beginning, middle, and, in this case, a happy ending; it also flows chronologically. Yet, with its dialogue balloons, panel format, flashbacks, color and black and white styling, and so on, the book has a far more visual clutter than that of a traditional printed text. As such, there are scenes created in which characters enter and leave, make cameo appearances, stick around or are never seen again -- all of which can be used as metaphor of medical life with its "on the fly" zeitgeist as staff, patients, and colleagues flit in and out of each other's lives owing to shift changes, changing career paths, and other major or minor life events. Thus, from a patient's perspective, there is only one narrative of concern, which has its own certain unique logic, the physician's version of this story consists of fragments of multiple patients' narratives -- a sequence of panels, but with different people, albeit perhaps all with similar dialogue balloons. By grasping this metaphoric allusion, students hopefully might become more understanding and empathic with patients who exhibit anxiety or even hostility as they get buffeted around the "medical system." In this regard, students could see the merit of having cancer patients and their families read *Cancer Vixen* as an informal "handbook" to cancer treatment in order to understand the complexities of detection, diagnosis, and treatment. Using a graphic novel in medical education is just another way to read and use such works, yet it appears to be innovative (Green and Myers, 2010).

In the last analysis, comic art is being used to depict cancer as part of the human condition by those who have experienced it. Jennifer Haydn, on being shown a draft of this article, noted that "cancer survivor" is now part of her identity. "That's exactly the point I am making with my book. In my case, a woman's identity, in part because I was 43, married, sexually active, and

opted for a bilateral mastectomy with reconstruction. I hope to give women a hopeful story about how there's life -- and sex -- and beauty -- and self -- after your boobs are gone."³⁰

Endnotes

¹ Versions of this paper have been presented as "Graphic Tales of Cancer in America," History of Science Society, Nov. 22, 2009 and "Cancer in the Comics: No Laughing Matter," American Association for the History of Medicine, Mayo Clinic, May 1, 2010.

² Kolata, Gina. 2009. "Forty Years' War: Advances Elusive in the Drive to Cure Cancer," *New York Times* (April 24). Online at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/24/health/policy/24cancer.html>>.

³ Jacob Wolff, *The Science of Cancerous Disease from Earliest Times to the Present* ([1907] USA: Science History Publications, 1989); Michael B. Shimkin, *Contrary to Nature* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1977; and Ronald W. Raven, *The Theory and Practice of Oncology: Historical Evolution and Present Principles* (Carnforth, UK: Parthenon Publishing Group, 1990).

⁴ Charles E. Rosenberg and Janet Golden, *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); and Robert A. Aronowitz, *Making Sense of Illness: Science, Society, and Disease* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵ Recent history of cancer studies include Leslie J. Regan, "Engendering the Dread Disease: Women, Men, and Cancer," *American Journal of Public Health* 87 (1997): 1779-1787; Barron H. Lerner, *The Breast Cancer Wars: Hope, Fear, and the Pursuit of a Cure in Twentieth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert A. Aronowitz, *Unnatural History: Breast Cancer and American Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Robert A. Aronowitz, "Do Not Delay: Breast Cancer and Time, 1900-1970," *Milbank Quarterly* 79 (2001): 355-386; Kirsten E. Gardner, *Early Detection: Women, Cancer, and Awareness Campaigns in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Barron H. Lerner, *When Disease Goes Public: Celebrity Patients and How We Look at Medicine* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006) especially Ch. 4.

See also, the special issue "Cancer in the Twentieth Century," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81 (2007): 1-334. Earlier studies that remain essential are: James T. Patterson, *The Dread Disease: Cancer and Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Ellen Leopold, *A Darker Ribbon: Breast Cancer, Women, and Their Doctors in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Barbara Clow, *Negotiating Disease: Power and Cancer Care, 1900-1950* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University

Press, 2001); and Barbara Clow, "Who's Afraid of Susan Sontag? Or, the Myths and Metaphors of Cancer Reconsidered," *Social History of Medicine* 14 (2001): 293-312.

⁶ Hillary Chute first drew attention to "a swiftly growing, yet diverse, body of graphic narratives about illness" (414) in a book review essay in 2007.

⁷ As Pedler says, "There's another illusion at work, too, and it's why I can happily read these kind of memoirs when they're graphic novels, but remain deeply suspicious of them in, say, cinema. (Just imagine the swelling orchestra and brave Oscar-desperate teen in the lead role.) It's the sense that a book like *Stitches* -- despite the professional binding and famous writers' blurbs -- could've been hand-made, left to dry, and pressed into your hands. Even the words in David's dotted-outlined balloons are handwritten, rather than typeset, whispers. It helps it feel less like a neat package of angst and inspiration and more like a document of genuine pain. In the end, *Stitches* passes that test: it hurts".

⁸ Indeed it has usually been driven by advances in technology. The first flowering of satirical prints in the 18th Century in England was followed by Daumier and other greats of French caricature, whose work was so powerful they were suppressed by the King. In post-Civil War America, the use of large woodcuts in newspapers let editorial cartoonist Thomas Nast attach symbols to corruption in New York that at least inconvenienced the Tammany Hall political machine. Full-color printing in newspapers led to an explosion of comic strips by the early years of the 20th Century, in which strips and storylines were about evenly split between adult and child audiences. The comic strips were designed to sell newspapers to adults. The comic book began as repackaged comic strips, sold as a magazine, and during World War II acquired quite a few adult readers, but many of these were lost during the 1950s suppression and adulteration of comic books. In the 1960s, cheaper printing technology led to the rise of self-published adult "underground" comics concerned with autobiographical issues as well as drugs and sex. The "graphic novel," although named as a marketing convenience, led to the popularity of longer form works, most notably Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the anthropomorphized story of his family's Holocaust experiences that won a Pulitzer Prize. Most recently, the Internet has meant that anyone with a basic modicum of computer knowledge can mount one's own webcomic, free of any editorial or publishing interference. The widespread use of computers is arguably leading to a more visually-sophisticated culture as well. At the same time, globalization and computerization have drastically dropped the cost of print. As a result of this history some forms of comic art are withering (such as comic strips and editorial cartoons) while others are growing rapidly (graphic novels and webcomics).

⁹ Julia Wertz did a webcomic, *The Fart Party*, at <<http://www.fartparty.org>> and also has lupus. She occasionally did a strip on the subject, such as two

titled "Autoimmunity: Denied" from this August online at <<http://www.fartparty.org/2009/08/02/autoimmunity-denied-pt-1>> and <<http://www.fartparty.org/2009/08/04/autoimmunity-denied-pt-2>>. In September she posted "Ass for Cash," a plea for money to pay her hospital bill for her lupus care at <<http://www.fartparty.org/2009/09/01/finger-paint-the-date>>.

¹⁰ As can be seen in the travelling exhibit, *Cartoonists Take Up Smoking*.

¹¹ This freedom extends into other media as well. Jenny Allen, while married to cartoonist Jules Feiffer, has chosen to tell her own story as a one-woman play, rather than collaborate with her husband on a graphic novel.

¹² David Chelsea's two pages on subjectivity do as good a job as needed to explain how this works in comics. See, Chelsea, David. 2008. *24x2*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf.

¹³ Bert Hansen's research on this topic does good work covering this genre of comic art.

¹⁴ By 2001, he was asked by a Brazilian website, "You used *The Death of Captain Marvel* as a way to express your feelings in relation to your father's death. How it was to do this project? What was the fans response to the story? After all, you killed a beloved hero!" Starlin, at two decades after the story, responded, "It was a cheap form of therapy. Loved doing the project and most fans liked it also. Did get a few death threats. No big deal. Got more grief from a number of my fellow professionals who were annoyed that I got the first U.S. deal with royalties."

¹⁵ *The Comics Journal*, one of the industry's longest surviving critical magazines, disliked the book intensely.

¹⁶ Other examples including Tom Thumb's death in *Squadron Supreme*, the more realistic deaths from radiation exposure instead of superpowers in Warren Ellis' *Ruins*, and *Supreme's* villain Darius Dax contracting cancer from exposure to Supremium (standing in for Kryptonite in this Superman-doppelganger comic book). In *Squadron Supreme* #9, Tom Thumb, a supergenius character, is dying of an unspecified cancer and he travels to the future in a vain attempt to steal a cure. He fails and his death is noted in a black text box as the last panel of the comic while issue #10 features his funeral. *Defenders* #4 (April 2012) introduces a former love of magician Dr. Strange who had died from ovarian cancer, but was brought back to life by magic. "Death" in superhero comic books generally turns out to be an abstract idea -- see, Mike Cotton's "Return of the Living Dead: In Today's Comics Landscape of Countdowns, Endsongs and Rebirths, Wizard Asks, 'Does Death Still Matter?'" *Wizard* (166; Aug. 2005):34-38.

¹⁷ The tension is noticeable in Garland's radio interview, which is one of the best on *Our Cancer Year* along with Ottaviani & Lieber's interview.

¹⁸ To aid the researcher, specific strips dealing with the topic are #402, 410-412, 414, 416, 421, 425, 427, 429, 487, 488, 491, and 514, which can be found in *Essential* although the collection omits some strips that may be relevant.

Several of the strips can be seen online at <<http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/episode-487>>; <<http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/episode-488>>; <<http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/episode-491>>; and a description of all the characters can be found at <<http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/cast-biographies>>.

¹⁹ Bechdel, Alison 2008. "Kris Kovick, In Memoriam," *Dykes to Watch Out For* blog (Sept. 11): <<http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/kris-kovick-in-memoriam>>; Robbins, Trina. 20-01. "Watch Out for Alison Bechdel (She Has the Secret to Superhuman Strength)," *The Comics Journal* #237 (Sept.):80-86, online at <http://archives.tcj.com/237/i_bechdel.html>.

²⁰ For sale at <http://www.bigelowchemists.com/product_info.php/products_id/5894>.

²¹ Minicomic refers to the method of production and distribution, and not the physical size of the comic which is the size of a modern magazine.

²² In support of public healthcare in the U.S., Barry Windsor-Smith wrote an essay on his website about his experiences with cancer, 24 years later.

²³ Described on HarperCollins' website as "47 jewel-like drawings by Ronald Searle made for his wife, Monica, each time she underwent chemotherapy. On New Year's Eve 1969, Monica Searle was diagnosed with a rare and virulent form of breast cancer. Each time she underwent treatment, Ronald produced a Mrs Mole drawing 'to cheer every dreaded chemotherapy session and evoke the blissful future ahead'. Filled with light and illuminated in glowing colours, the drawings speak of love, optimism and hope. Like the mediaeval illuminated manuscripts such as the 15th-century *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, to which the title of this book refers, the 47 drawings are on an intimate scale and were never intended for publication. The story of Monica's survival against the odds and the part played by the encouragement of her husband will move many people who have either experienced cancer for themselves or been affected through a close family member or friend." From <<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/Titles/74146/les-tr%C3%A8s-riches-heures-de-mrs-mole-epub-edition-ronald-searle-ronald-searle-80007449118>>.

²⁴ <<http://www.act-i-vate.com/creators?id=37>> has biographical information and artwork samples can be seen at <<http://www.topshelfcomix.com/preview.php?preview=the-story-of-my-tits&page=1>>. For additional information, see, Daniel Elkin's interview, "Sharon Lintz Shares Her Personal Struggle in Pornhounds," *Comics Bulletin*, March 23, 2012. <<http://www.comicsbulletin.com/main/interviews/sharon-lintz-shares-her-personal-struggle-pornhounds>> and review at <<http://www.comicsbulletin.com/main/reviews/pornhounds-2>>.

²⁵ Such as Howard Brody's *Stories of Sickness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) or Anne Hunsaker Hawkins' *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography*, (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999).

²⁶ Susan M. Squier, "Literature and Medicine, Future Tense: Making it Graphic," *Literature and Medicine*. 27 (2008):124-152.

²⁷ Arthur W. Frank, "Reclaiming an Orphan Genre: The First-Person Narrative of Illness," *Literature and Medicine*. 13 (1994):1-21.

²⁸ In this process one of us, JTHC, was the instructor.

²⁹ See <<http://rcpsc.medical.org/canmeds/index.php>>.

³⁰ She continues, "That's where I depart from Cancer Vixen. More and more younger women are getting this disease and they need to realize that their boobs aren't their whole feminine identity and that they can be totally hot without them... mine will be a fictionalized memoir, with cancer occupying the last 70 pages of 340. The rest are all the circumstances and events in my life that bear on this experience and make it like the climax of a (twisted) novel. My flat-chested girlhood, my father's obsession with breasts, my mother's breast cancer, my mother-in-law's death from lung cancer, my other mother-in-law's death from breast cancer, nursing my kids, and then: boom! I want every meaning of my breast cancer to irradiate my reader's brain at the moment of my diagnosis in the story. So they can see it almost in a literary light" (Personal communication, Oct. 6, 2009).

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